

North of Here

Ryan Arthurs

Since childhood, I have spent my summers paddling and portaging through the northern woods of Ontario and Quebec. Like an early explorer in my cedar canvas canoe, I've accessed some of Canada's most pristine and remote wilderness.

What is gained in isolation, however, comprises one's own safety. Medical attention lies several hours or even days away. The smallest slip can be life altering. Canoeists must contend with extreme heat, cold, and storms that take even the most perceptive trippers by surprise. My journeys, therefore, do not only provide me with an opportunity to escape civilization and enjoy the natural world; they allow me to prove myself.

We live in a world that increasingly favors non-immediate, digital interaction and removal from the natural world. Our maturation from childhood to adulthood may only be marked by an array of jobs, certificates, or diplomas. My own childhood followed these new realities. Because I had no other opportunities to physically and mentally test my limits, canoe tripping became my rite of passage.

This passage, however, did not occur alone. My success and survival on these trips is a result of the friendship and strength of my friends and fellow canoeists. These relationships are the closest and most enduring in my life and serve as the inspiration for the portraits in this series of photographs.

For the past year, I have been photographing white-water kayakers, canoeists, and the rugged landscapes they travel through. This work aims to push aside traditional concepts of pastoral aesthetics and capture the beauty and desire that paddlers exhibit through their spirit. My subjects are defined by what they do, and they become themselves in the doing. They desire to return to a more simple, off-the-grid way of life one that is full of challenge, adventure, independence and spontaneity. I'm fascinated with photography's ability to express the intimacy between the paddler and the challenges posed by his journey.